SURVEY OF FACTORY EMPLOYMENT

Evelyn C. McKay

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

Survey of Factory Employment
by
Evelyn C. McKay

Speech at AAWB - 1927

Employment is a vital problem for everyone of us, whether or not we see. It is a particularly vital problem for the blind since it is one of the best avenues by which they may take their places among the sighted.

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I was interested to note yesterday as I listened to the very interesting papers on the Social Adjustment of the Blind Individual that speaker after speaker stressed the essential importance of employment in this adjustment. One speaker even went so far as to say that "the individual cannot achieve social adjustment without work."

Ever since the American Foundation for the Blind came into being, workers all over the country have asked the Foundation to help in the solution of this fundamental problem and its directors have recognized the vital importance of the whole subject of employment. Last fall for the first time it became practical for the Foundation to begin work in this field. We were very anxious to have whatever work we did exceedingly practical and very closely related to the needs of the workers who were going to make use of the results we obtained. The first step then, was to call a conference of about a dozen people who had given a great deal of time and thought to the placement of the blind, and to ask them what we could do that would have immediate practical value for them, and how we should go about the doing of it.

The conference agreed that the field of occupations for the blind had three main divisions: first, those blind persons who are working side by side with the sighted in industrial plants, stores or offices; those who are following independently some profession or vocation such as osteopathy, salesmanship, etc. and also those engaged in independent business enterprises for themselves, such

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employment as being necessary for the blind individual
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Over three and a half million persons are blind here in
United States over eighteen years of age, and more than twenty
million persons are handicapped by some physical defect, thereby
affected their employment opportunities, though
fortunately there are relatively few persons totally blind, the
problem is nevertheless relatively big. Besides those
who are handicapped by defective hearing, speech impediments or

as the keepers of confectionery stands, newsdealers, etc. These two groups are working in competition with the seeing and might be called the "competitive" groups. The third group is composed of those who are working in subsidized industries whether in special workshops or in their homes. The situation represented by these subsidized workers appeared to require different methods of study used for the first two groups and it was therefore agreed that for the time being the Foundation should concentrate its attention upon the competitive worker.

Where to begin was thenext question. The members of the Committee felt that the most practical study would be a catalogue of jobs being held, or occupations being followed by the blind not merely a list of jobs which theoretically might be suitable occupations for blind persons, but a catalogue of those which are actually being followed at the present time with more or less success. Such a list would serve several purposes. In the first place it would give placement agents and other field workers new ideas as to what opportunities might be found for blind people in their own communities. In the second place, it would furnish good ammunition with which to approach employers, showing what actually is being done by the blind elsewhere, and asking for new opportunities on this basis. In the third place, if the catalogue included not only the name of the job, but also information about the kind of man or woman who worked on that job, something about age, education, previous occupations, and special ability, and likewise some information about the job, such as a description of the operations performed, and the range of wages or profits,-then with this information we could study the various occupations and determine which of them afford the greatest dompenstaion, which of them require special qualifications, why some men are more successful than others in similar work, and which occupations are as yet comparatively undeveloped. This list should include all blind persons who were engaged in remunerative

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occupations, either in industrial or commercial organizations or on an independent basis, whether they had been placed through some organizationor had established themselves. It should also include all workers so engaged at any time since Jan. 1, 1926.

The next question was how to get this information. The members of the Conference felt it would be more satisfactory to secure data through the local organizations, than to attempt to interview the blind worker on the job. This arrangement protects the relationship between the local organization and the blind person in its community, and greatly reduces the time and expense involved in gathering the information. A schedule of needed information was prepared by which contained the minimum facts which they believed necessary for an intelligent study of the various jobs reported. It was fully realized by all the members of the committee that in many cases the information called for on that schedule would not be available, partly because many organizations had no time or facilities for keeping such detailed records, and partly because in the case of persons who had developed their own business without the assistance of any organization they might be unwilling to give some of the vital facts about their income and profits. Nevertheless it was deemed desirable to include all the vital questions even though many of them might be left unanswered. A copy of this schedule appears on page--

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I want to speak for a moment of that cooperation and of what it means to us. I know from experience the amount of time and effort involved in making out these schedules. It is no small task. Yet no one has declined to undertake it, and that is what makes this study possible. The Foundation is not doing this alone. It is only acting as a clearing-house for the information you pour in. Without your help we can do nothing. But you have given that help most generously and I want to thank you.

Now as to results. You realize of course that the fifty organizations mentioned do not include all the organizations in the United States. They do include those which have given most attention to placement work and those which were easily accessible. One of the next things we shall do is to complete the canvass of the other organizations in the country so that if possible every state will be represented in our study.

It is too soon yet to give any definite figures on results. Very few of the organizations have sent in all their reports. Some of the largest ones have for one reason or another not been able to send in any at all. Therefore the figures we have now are by no means representative and should not be quoted.

Nevertheless I should like to tell you something about the reports that have come in. We have received to date 818 of these and I have grouped them roughly according to the kind of work.

The largest group is that of factory jobs, of which there have been 141 reported. These include packing, wrapping, operating drill presses, and all kinds of assembling. The next group is that of professional workers numbering 130 and including teachers, social

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Survey
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workers, lawyers, osteopaths and musicians. Salesmen and independent business men ranked next. It is somewhat difficult to separate these two groups since their work is so similar, but in general if a man had capital invested in his business he was counted as an independent business man, if not, he was classified as a salesman. Other occupations reported include tuners, persons engaged in caning, weaving and basketry, household jobs such as-janitors, household helpers and nurse maids, and clerical jobs such as-dictaphone operators, telephone operators and messengers. A number were classified as "Miscellaneous" because they did not fall into any of the foregoing groups. There are a great many interesting and unusual jobs in this miscellaneous group many of which invite further study.

As I said before, it is too soon to draw any definite conclusions from the data thus far received, yet certain general truths are becoming apparent.

In the first place we need more information. We need to keep on adding material to our files so that instead of becoming obsolete and dead the information it contains will increase steadily in volume and will be always up-to-date and vivid. We need also more detailed information on certain occupations which seem to offer unusual opportunities. This can probably be best obtained through intensive studies of those vocations with special attention to the possibilities of their further development.

Secondly it is apparent that there are hundreds of blind men and women throughout the country who are working side by side with the seeing and performing their work efficiently. We shall no longer need to appeal to the sentiment of the employer but can demonstrate that the employment of the blind in competition with the seeing is a sound business proposition.

It remains to educate the employer and the public to a realiza-

of this fact. The placement which is made on a basis of sentiment is not a sound placement nor one likely to last. Of course we all realize that in many cases the only way to get a hearing from the employer is by appealing to his sense of social responsibility or his sympathy with a handicapped person. But the placement which depends solely and entirely on the employer's sentiment is not likely to survive a period of hard times or industrial readjustment. The person who is put on the job must be able ti fill it effictively and to demonstrate his efficiency if he is not to prove himself a liability rather than an asset to the cause of the blind.

The third which may be drawn is that there is a wide field of occupations which may be followed with satisfaction and success, by blind persons. This ever increasing range of variety is one of the most encouraging things in the field. It means not only that it will gradually become easier to fill openings for the blind, but in other words, to get a man a job-it means it will become more and more possible to place the man on the job for which he is specially fitted by his abilities, his experience, his temperament and his tastes. It is probably better for John Smith to work at making brooms than for him not to work at all. But suppose he is possessed of business ability and pleasing personality, is it not better to find for him some occupation in which he can use his individual initiative and intelligence to a much greater extent than he can in making of brooms? We all recognize that certain men are not fitted for certain jobs, and we avoid placing a man on a job which he is obviously incapable of holding. The next step will be to place a man not only on a job which he can hold, but on the job which he can hold best, and in which he can make use of his special abilities and interests. This is not a reverse of anything that has been done; it is merely the natural development of the work which has been growing so steadily

for the last twenty years.

Placement work has its discouraging moments for every field worker. It is affected by the industrial depressions and irregularities which make employment one of the most serious problems of modern life for every one. Like all other problems this is intensified in the field of work for the blind but the past efforts of workers for the blind have been so constructive, the opportunities are so every increasing, and the demonstrations of what actually can be done are so encouraging that we should not feel more than temporarily discouraged. The attitude of the employer and of the public is as it must always be, one of the most vital problems, and the education of the employer and of the public to a vision of the opportunities yet to be developed, is our task.

We all have our handicaps, some of us health, some inadequate education, some ~~of~~ unpleasing personality. What we do is to find the occupation in which our particular handicap matters least and our particular abilities count for most. Blindness is only another handicap-often less serious than those I have mentioned. We must help the public to see this. Then shall come the time when the blind man will take his place beside his seeing brother in office, shop or factory, giving no more thought to his handicap than is given to the individual handicaps of us all.

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